

Voices on the Margins:  
Collaborative and Individual Approaches  
To Sustaining an Identity  
as an Anti-Racist Critical Multicultural Educator

*Virginia Lea & Erma Jean Sims*

Virginia Lea

Sylvia Payne was a woman of substance! She was a woman of Irish descent who became a doctor in 1900, a time when most women could only dream of such a profession. As an adolescent, Sylvia had told her father, a minister in the Protestant church, of her dream. "Don't be ridiculous," he had replied. However, Sylvia's mother had given her daughter quite a different response. "I have no doubt you will be a doctor then," she had said.

Sylvia was my paternal grandmother. She became a doctor, and then psychoanalyst. It is true that relative to most women in the English society in which she lived she was materially and racially privileged. However, her feat was no mean one. She had an enormous impact on many of her colleagues, and was a professional role model for women who followed after her. She also has an enormous impact on my identity. When I was encouraged at boarding school to take up a "profession suited to women," I remembered my grandmother. Sylvia would not have let the controlling cacophony of authoritarianism decide on the direction of her life.

So armed with my own material and racial privilege, I set out to create my own identity in a different world as soon as I left school. I came to the United States at the end of the sixties, and since then, many lifetimes, many countries, and numerous identities later, I am here, at this point in time, pondering on whom I have become.

I am consciousness given creation by the people I have known and loved, and by the people who have loved me. I am consciousness shamed by the people I have harmed and strengthened by those who have harmed me. I am Semite spirit, liberated by soul Africa, and uplifted by Gaelic inspiration. I am the cruel and oppressive worlds I am a part of and the kind, egalitarian worlds for which I strive. I am a long journey past and an even longer one ahead. I am souls past and present, including Sylvia Payne's.

### Erma Jean Sims

My mother was a math teacher in the segregated South in Alabama. She was the first woman in our family to go to college. Although, she only attended college for one year at a historically black college, she learned the value of education and found out how smart she really was in mathematics. When she came home from college, her father, my grandfather, said to her, "If you're so smart then you should be able to teach me to read." She replied, "Of course, I can teach you to read." She delighted in teaching him to read. He had spent all of his youth working as a sharecropper and had no formal education. After several months of teaching him to read, he suddenly got the hang of it and took off like a rocket—reading everything insight. He loved to read the newspaper to my grandmother. He was so proud! He told her, "You go out and teach those young Black people how to read, count and figure as good as those white folks."

My mother was very proud of her college education and saw teaching as a way of "uplifting the race." She wanted to share her love for learning with young people who she knew would have to face the harsh realities of racism, prejudice and bigotry which awaited them at every turn.

Her courage and perseverance are an inspiration to me. I want to be like her, a teacher, a giver of life, hope, and freedom—freedom from the ignorance, despair and hopelessness that kills the human spirit and robs us of our curiosity and creativity. She is my role model, my first teacher, and the best friend I ever had. Her hopes and dreams live on in me.

I am a truth seeker who chooses to shed light in dark places. I am a Native American woman in black skin whose soul cries out to the ancestors for the wisdom of our people. I am a mother who loves the unloved and cares for those long ago forgotten by a cruel and unforgiving world. I am a child whose heart is full of gladness and sorrow. I am the one who will feel the pain of hatred and oppression.

### Virginia Lea and Erma Jean Sims

We are teacher educators who consider ourselves a part of a growing number of critical multicultural anti-racist teachers, committed to action to change the educational system in the United States. We direct our work towards transforming the processes and outcomes of this system so that they reflect equity and social justice on the fully informed terms of those traditionally most oppressed. This work, however, is not easy, particularly in the present conservative political climate. This climate is evidenced by increased standardization of basic literacy and numeracy skills, a one-size-fits-all pedagogy and subject matter content, and standardized testing in K-12 public schools and schools of education.

Those of us committed to resisting and promoting alternatives to this standardization need to gain clarity about the ways in which hegemony operates in class-

rooms, communities and in ourselves (Bartholome, 1996; Kumashiro, 2004; Lea & Helfand, 2004). As a result of hegemonic structures and practices, the road ahead of us is littered with obstacles, both structural and ideological. We need to be able to support each other in our work, and encourage student teachers, beginning teachers, practiced teachers, teacher educators, parents, and community members to join the movement.

In order to make an active contribution to sustaining this movement and encouraging others to join, we interviewed colleagues who were engaged in transformative work. We believed that by uncovering and sharing the strategies these colleagues used to sustain their positions as anti-racist, critical multicultural educators in the face of considerable opposition and barriers, we would be making an important contribution to those of us struggling to hold on to identities and practices as progressive and liberatory educators. Our goals may be stated as follows:

To identify teachers who defined themselves as anti-racist critical multicultural educators;

To uncover their journeys to developing identities as anti-racist critical multicultural educators;

To identify the strategies, both individual and collaborative, that these educators used to sustain their identities and practices as anti-racist critical multicultural educators.

### The Current Educational Climate

The current educational climate is the result of a 20-year backlash against the multicultural movement of the 1960 and early 1970s (Sleeter, 2004). As bell hooks stated in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (2004),

When contemporary progressive educators all around the nation challenged the way institutionalized systems of domination (race, sex, nationalistic imperialism) have, since the origin of public education used schooling to reinforce dominator values, a pedagogical revolution began in college classrooms. Exposing the covert conservative underpinnings shaping the content of material in the classroom as well as the way in which ideologies of domination inform the way thinkers teach and act in the classroom, opened a space where educators could begin to take seriously what it would look like to teach from a standpoint aimed at liberating the minds of our students rather than indoctrinating them. (p. 1)

“The trio of anti-immigrant, anti-affirmative action, and anti-bilingual legislation—California Propositions 187, 209, and 227—have been echoed across the United States” (Lea, 2004a, p.118). Newcomers to the teaching profession are contending with increasingly scripted, standardized classrooms that are not conducive to anti-racist, critical multicultural education. Conservative political leaders have

managed to co-opt the achievement agenda away from critical multiculturalists and shift the discourse back to the basics (Sleeter, 2004). Even anti-racist, critical multicultural educators are finding themselves having to choose between conforming to the dominant educational culture or sustaining their identities and practices. We must help these educators to identify strategies to sustain their voices on the margins of the educational system.

Teachers currently cannot avoid the standards movement. Because of the extent to which testing based on state standards is driving day to day processes in schools, teachers must reckon with the assumptions of this movement...new teachers not only lack power within the schools, but also detailed familiarity with the curriculum they are expected to teach, and confidence in their pedagogy that comes with experience. With support a new teacher can learn to work constructively with multicultural education in the context of the standards movement. Without that support and encouragement, swimming against the tide is much more difficult. (Sleeter, 2004, p. 26-27)

### Whiteness as a Barrier to Anti-Racism Critical Multicultural Education

The majority of educators in the United States are white and middle class. In *What Keeps Teachers Going?*, Sonia Nieto (2003) shares current research into the impact this reality is having on the educational experiences of working-class students of color. Nieto writes,

All teachers, whether new or veteran, also need to know more about the students they teach. Our public urban schools are increasingly filled by students whose lives and experiences are vastly different from those of their teachers, who are overwhelmingly White, middle class, and mono-lingual English-speakers. Most know very little, either from direct experience or training, about the diversity of their students. If this is the case, they may become frustrated and impatient, longing for an idealized past that never was, when all children were easy to teach and looked like them. Unless we prepare new teachers with the kinds of experiences that equip them to go into schools with both level-headedness and hope, the situation will remain the same. (p. 125)

In other words, research indicates that educators teach best to students who are most like themselves in terms of culture, race, ethnicity, and class (Shulman, 1992). Our response to this reality is complex. We must clearly work to develop alternative teacher recruitment and preparation programs that address current barriers to more teachers of color and people from low-income backgrounds becoming teachers (Epstein, 1994). However, this long-term plan does not immediately address the needs of students whose cultural scripts do not match the cultural scripts assumed as normal practice by many teachers, who are disproportionately white. If the needs of all of our students are to be met, we must develop more anti-racist, critical multicultural educators who can empower students who are unlike themselves. Since large

numbers of teachers from working class African American, Latino, Indigenous, and other oppressed communities are not looking to become teachers (Gordon, 2000), it makes sense to make sure that the people who become teachers are anti-racist and critical multicultural. This means first of all addressing the cultural scripts that drive our own practice, often without our own awareness (King, 2001).

### What Are Cultural Scripts?

Cultural scripts are different ways of thinking, feeling, believing, and acting. Cultural scripts are arranged hierarchically. The cultural scripts in the mainstream reflect the interests of the socio-economic and educational power structure. Both mainstream and alternative cultural scripts live within us. As Deborah Britzman (1998), told us, “social structures live in individuals and... individuals live in history” (p.138). Believing that we embody cultural scripts like individualism, democracy, and egalitarianism prevents us from seeing our own contradictions. But if we “choose” to, we can change the cultural scripts that influence our practice (Lea, 2004a).

### Whiteness as Cultural Scripts

Whiteness is a dynamic set of ideological cultural scripts that people construct, reconstruct, internalize and practice to reproduce white privilege and social, economic, cultural and political advantage. Whiteness is a process that leads to white socio-economic, political and cultural supremacy. By privileging certain cultural scripts over others in the mainstream of the United States, including public classrooms, white supremacy is assured. (Lea, Sims & Takhar, 2004).

Amanda Lewis (2004) described the following all too familiar reality. Some white middle class teachers assume that the “normal” way of celebrating is their way—low volume, one on one congratulations—and that when African American children express alternative styles of celebrating in the classroom—higher volume, public, and kinesthetic—this is considered a behavior problem. In making these assumptions, teachers are, in our view, following one of the cultural scripts that make up whiteness. By valuing some norms, values and cultural practices over others, whiteness sustains the social structure in which we live in the United States, and the place cultural groups hold in that hierarchy. Whiteness sustains the structure of schools.

The more power and authority one has within the educational system, the more likely it is that one *cannot* follow alternative, transformative scripts if one wants to keep one’s job. The knowledge, identities and practices of educators reflect their positions in the socio-economic, race, and gender hierarchy. The political nature of this knowledge and the ways in which it legitimizes our interests is often hidden to us in a society built on structural inequities that are given legitimacy by a well-disseminated system of myth and ideology. When our position(s) in the socio-economic becomes visible, we frequently rationalize our relationship to power in

order to reduce our discomfort. This discomfort arises out of an awareness of our privilege and/or a negative sense of self that has been “transmitted” by the dominant system of myth and ideology. Jeannie Oakes and Martin Lipton (1999) described

four related ideologies—revolving around the myths of merit, scientific efficiency, competition, and progress—that characterize American culture and schooling and prevent society and schools from realizing their democratic possibilities. Teachers who sense the omnipresence of ideology—including their own—enlarge their ability to interpret the world of their schools and to succeed in their daily work. (p. 15)

However, as human beings we also have agency. All knowledge and identity is constructed in social contexts, and given support, we can place ourselves in contexts in which we can develop alternative cultural scripts, based on anti-racism, critical multiculturalism and social justice. Even if we are immersed in mainstream educational contexts, once we become aware of the ways in which we have been socialized by particular cultural scripts, we can, if motivated, practice alternative cultural scripts and act differently in the many contexts of our lives. Historically, it is this awareness that has characterized the activism of anti-racist, critical multicultural educators. However, we note that while following an alternative script represents our wanting to change the existing system *and* our preparedness to take a risk to do so, those of us with white privilege are likely to experience less severe socio-economic and political consequences when we choose to take such risks.

### Review of the Literature

The literature is replete with stories about extraordinary educators, aware of their own lives and the ways the society in which they lived worked, who have taken risks, and managed to continue their anti-racist, social justice actions in the face of severe obstacles. What follows is a very small selection from this literature.

#### **Jane Addams, Ida B. Wells, and Herb Kohl**

In *Refusing Racism* (2002), Cynthia Stokes Brown examines the anti-racist lives of several individuals. In the following, we draw on Stokes’ research to extrapolate the traits and strategies they all share in their quest to continue their work on the margins.

**Jane Addams** was born in 1860 (-1935). Addams was the daughter of a white mill owner, banker and state senator—one of the most powerful men in Illinois. In 1889, she opened Hull House, a “settlement house” for immigrants from Europe that provided social services. Hull House also functioned as a space in which alternative political minds revisited educational and political culture and developed community networks as a foundation of democracy.

**Ida B. Wells** was born in 1862 (-1931). Wells was an African American woman who lived in Chicago and developed an international anti-lynching campaign. She set out to show that the causes of lynching were rooted in social and economic

repressions and not in emotionally charged accusations of rape that usually lead to the death of black men. She was influenced by Addams' ideas of community-based education as a site of powerful social reform. Both women broadened the definition of progressive education to one that was community-based, directed towards equality, life-long, and engaged notions of racial and gender democracy.

**Herb Kohl** was born in 1937 and raised in the Bronx in New York. Kohl is the grandson of a non-Zionist, democratic socialist, white Jewish immigrant from Russia in 1905. Kohl has written numerous books, chapters, and articles on critical pedagogy, including the seminal, "I won't learn from you" that describes the willed refusal to learn of some oppressed students as an act of resistance against a culture of domination. Kohl believes that redemption comes from action against injustice in the world, and that to do this work we have to keep people's suffering in mind and not rest in comfort.

Since Kohl is still very much alive, we write the following paragraph in the present perfect tense to reflect his on-going activism and the living legacy of Adams and Wells. Over their lifetimes, Adams, Wells, and Kohl have expressed several traits in common. Throughout their activist lives, they have all been in good health, and approached life with unusual optimism. They have had a high degree of energy with a less-than-usual need for sleep. In addition, they have all had a pronounced capacity for independent thinking, and a relative lack of interest in material possessions and wealth, an important quality in sustaining a life that did not promise riches. They have all been able to envision a society without racial discrimination, to maintain an on-going awareness of the suffering of others, and to hold a moral commitment to action against injustice. Lastly, they have believed in political activism as an approach to teaching.

### **Christine Clark and James O'Donnell and the Cultural Scripts of Whiteness**

In their (1999) edited book, *Becoming and Unbecoming White: Owning and Disowning a Racial Identity*, Christine Clark and James O'Donnell describe their work to create oppositional spaces to fight for equality and social justice. Clark and O'Donnell are white, multicultural educators who work with student teachers who are not receptive to the ideas embedded in critical multicultural education and a critique of the discourse of whiteness. Clark & O'Donnell's anti-racist pedagogy is based on the following strategies:

Using narrative research (story-telling as pedagogy) to enable white teachers to tell their stories about racism and become aware of the systemic signifiers and markers of racism;

Exposing white student teachers to experiences outside the Eurocentric norm; and

Setting up alternative classroom structures so that these student teachers engage with people of color and anti-racist whites, on the terms of these groups, through books, newspapers, and films.



### The Politics of Survival in Academia

The goal of the authors of the book, *The Politics of Survival in Academia: Narratives of Inequality, Resilience, and Success* (2002), is to encourage all persons from marginalized groups to express their views, and spell out for the public the secrets of their resilience and determination to excel even against the expectations of others. Resilience is seen as the ability to pursue academic goals over a period of time regardless of the personal sacrifices, efforts required, and obstacles confronted.

The authors in this edited volume believe that survival and success in academia requires a sophisticated knowledge and analysis of the politics of academia. This includes understanding that structural injustices substantially jeopardize the intellectual, theoretical and methodological contributions made by faculty and scholars of color to the various disciplines in the academy. It also includes understanding that systemic racist practices undermine the richness of an open, humane and fair academy.

The authors believe that the politics of identity are seminal to their survival. They have managed to self empower by creating new selves without rejecting their “enduring” selves (i.e., the selves strongly connected to their ethno/racial cultures and groups.). Their ability to stay the course has involved confronting failure and racism and neglect and doing it with courage, resourcefulness, and persistence. They have learned to address the clashes between their cultural values and structural indifference to cultural diversity, and have in this contradictory space realized that prejudice, racism, and inequality dehumanize not only victims but also oppressors.

While the strategies offered by all of the contributors are of interest, those used by Lila Jacobs and Cecil Canton stood out for us. For Jacobs, survival on the margins is enhanced by recognizing the power of telling our own stories as a way of defining and redefining our selves and giving voice to the voiceless. “Telling my stories is an affirmation of myself, as well as an act of solidarity with so many other; others who are also struggling to keep their core identity as the situations and circumstances of their lives change” (p. 13). For Jacobs, “my work comes from a place of love, but I still use anger that comes from seeing injustice as a motivational force. Love doesn’t preclude wrath, in fact, it sometimes demands it” (p.9).

For Canton, working on the margins depends on avoiding being “co-opted” by a system that refused to accept Blacks as equals. Canton’s identity was “fired by self-determination and forged in “Black Power.” He draws on this ideology in rejecting a sense of desperation and feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness, and the pressure to be a “Black white man” and a “sell out.” He encourages the reader to “find others of like mind who can support you and support them as well.” He concludes by encouraging the reader to “ always be positive and as the late Adam Clayton Powell, from New York reminded us, “Keep the faith, baby!” (p. 32).

In what follows, we share our own research into the strategies, both individual and collaborative, that some of the anti-racist critical multicultural educators we know use to sustain their identities and practices.



### Methodology

In our own research we began by identifying 30 K-12, college, university, and community educators who we considered to be doing anti-racist, critical multicultural work. For this stage in what is an on-going project we then chose 10 of these educators—four each, plus each other—to interview in depth about their journeys to developing identities as anti-racist critical multicultural educators. We encouraged the educators to tell us their stories. We hoped that the personal narratives that emerged would reflect fully the cultural scripts that have shaped the interviewees' lives. We also wanted to find out how they had actively developed strategies to reshape their cultural scripts when necessary to meet their anti-racist critical multicultural goals.

After transcribing the interviews, we used discourse analysis (Lea, 2004b) to identify the strategies, both individual and collaborative, that these educators used to sustain their identities and practices on the margins of the dominant educational system. We did so within a social reconstructionist, anti-racist, critical multicultural framework (Sleeter & Grant, 1994), acknowledging the impact of our own cultural scripts on our interpretations.

### Profiles of Ten Anti-Racist, Critical Multicultural Educators

**Elena Featherston** identifies as a black American woman of African, Irish and Native American descent, as a daughter, mother and grandmother, and as anti-racist activist. In the past she has identified as a writer, filmmaker, educator, and artist, she now sees her self as a multicultural consultant and a trainer, and a mediator. Elena, who has taught at New College of San Francisco in the departments of Women's Studies and Psychology, made the decision to develop her own organization offering cross-cultural consulting from outside the academy. Her friends who work inside the academy provide access to the trends in the languaging of power. Elena recognizes her own contradictory identities—the ways in which she is both privileged and a target of race, class and gender oppression.

**Jean Ishibashi** is an oral his/her/ourstorian and migrant academic worker, whose family was imprisoned during WWII. Jean re-searches, re-cognizes, re-spects, and re-tells the stories she uncovers as an activist educator. She also identifies, as a daughter, a partner, a mother, and as a person of color who is Asian and Japanese American. Jean attained her Ph.D. in social and cultural studies in education from the University of California at Berkeley. She has taught in the Ethnic Studies departments and Schools of Education at Sonoma State and San Francisco State Universities, as well as the university of California, Berkeley.

**Judy Helfand** identifies as a white upper middle class woman with both Jewish and Chrsitian heritage, a lesbian, a mother, a feminist, and a partner. She has worked as a community activist since she attended the University of California at Berkeley in the 60s. Judy taught high school in the seventies. She currently teaches American

Cultures at Santa Rosa Junior College, offers workshops that address what it means to be white, and is a researcher and author in this area. She lives with her partner of 25 years in rural Sonoma County in California. Her earth-based spirituality, lesbianism, radical views in regard to politics, economics, and the environment, and her antiracist outspokenness help define her marginality as her economic security, class background, white skin, and education maintain her connection to power and privilege.

**Kitty Kelly Epstein** identifies herself as a white woman of Irish descent, a mother, a community activist and a critical multicultural, anti-racist educator. Kitty has been active in the education arena for more than 25 years, and does not view herself as on the margins because her center has been a struggle with oppressed people against racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia in the Oakland schools and throughout the state of California. In the early 1990s, Kitty fought against the introduction of a series of racist social studies textbooks, published by Houghton Mifflin, into the Oakland schools. This action is just one example of how Kitty has used her Ph.D. in education to point out the inaccuracies, omissions, and outright lies in social studies texts, and help parents and community activists' voices to be heard and affirmed. Kitty inspires her pre-service teachers with her own stories of battles won and lost in the fight for intellectual excellence and high academic performance for all the children in the city of Oakland and the State of California.

**Edinamara (Mara) Rufino** is a black Brazilian educator of African, Portuguese and Native-Brazilian descent, the mother of 12 month old Stefano and the only daughter from lower-class family of five children. Mara is the first woman in her family to have ever finished high school, and the only person in her whole family who holds a higher education degree, speaks languages other than her native one, and to visit other countries. She lives in Italy with husband Marco, and currently teaches ESL. She studied for her BA and MA at Sonoma State University. Her thesis concerned Italian teachers' perceptions of multicultural education. Mara believes that knowledge as well as perceived reality are very subjective, and are shaped by one's cultural paradigm. Her experiences in places such as Angola, Sweden, Jerusalem, Gaza Strip, United States, and Italy as well as in Brazil have provided her with critical insights and first hand experiences regarding oppression, classism, injustice, racism, violence and many forms of discrimination, both from oppressors as well as oppressed people. She feels that her life experience has enhanced her ways of seeing, thinking, feeling, believing and acting, but it has also turned her into a 34-year-old-defragmented-woman without a "home." She is currently planning an intercultural writing project concerning women's perception of everyday life in the United States, Italy, and Brazil.

**Carrie Wilson** identifies herself as an African American woman, a wife of 32 years, a mother of three, a daughter from a family of eleven children, a high school administrator, and an education researcher. Carrie is the Vice Principal at an inner city urban high school in Vallejo, California. She attempted to implement an approved but controversial new grading system that did not include grades of "D" and "F." The students were given an "I" (incomplete) grade instead of "D"s and "F"s. These

students were expected to come to the Academic Clearinghouse that she established and directed to make up missed assignments, tests, and demonstrate academic competency in incomplete subjects. Carrie found her voice being marginalized by teachers, students, and parents as well as school district personnel who insisted upon a return to the traditional grading system of “A” to “F”.

**Tony Gross** describes himself as an African American male raised by his grandparents in Atlanta, Georgia. Tony climbed the academic hierarchy, first as a special education classroom teacher, then as a vice principal for over 20 years, and then as the principal of Jesse Bethel, an inner city urban high school. Tony’s leadership of the high school hasn’t always been easy due to the progressive and controversial programs he helped to design and was hired to implement in this highly diverse high school. One of the programs for which Tony came under attack was the program that Carrie attempted to implement.

**William Frederick “Fred” Ellis** describes himself as an African American male, a father, a Morehouse College alumni, a critical multicultural anti-racist educator, a product of the civil rights movement, and a freedom fighter for social justice and academic excellence for all children. Fred was the founder of the Ravenswood Project at a private catholic college in Oakland. The Ravenswood Project was located in East Palo Alto, California and was an outreach, recruitment and retention, off campus teacher education program aimed at increasing the number of teachers of color in the teaching profession. The project came under fire by the college administration whose commitment to diversity was more symbolic than real. Fred refused to abandon the idea of increasing the numbers of people of color in the teaching field. He helped to forge a partnership between California State University and the Oakland Unified School District with a similar mission of preparing qualified people of color to join the teaching profession and teach in Oakland schools. The Oakland Partnership Program is still going strong.

**Erma Jean Sims** identifies as a Black woman of Cherokee and Irish descent raised in a middle class black community in a small Ohio town. Inspired by her mother, a math teacher in the segregated South, Erma Jean was informed at an early age about whiteness cultural scripts and the coping strategies necessary to navigate an often hostile society. Her Juris Doctor in Law has provided her with critical insights into the ways in which racism has been codified and legalized in our educational system. As a teacher educator at Sonoma State University, she is actively involved in teaching critical multicultural pedagogy and critical race theory to her students in the elementary teaching credential program. She continues to struggle with other oppressed people around issues of racism, classism, sexism and homophobia.

**Virginia Lea** identifies as a woman of European (French, Irish, and Scandinavian) and Arab descent, as a mother and partner, and as someone committed to the struggle for kindness, equality, equity, and social justice. She was raised in a professional, upper middle-class family in southeast England, and was profoundly influenced by her boarding school experience, which she hated. She went to the

United States at the age of 18, where she began her university experience. Virginia saw her 20 years teaching in England, Trinidad, Quebec, and the United States, and her sojourns in Algeria and France as a part of a collective effort to transform the injustices of the education and wider social system. She received her Ph.D. in social and cultural studies in education from the University of California at Berkeley in order to be more effective in pursuing her educational and political activism. Virginia's current educational activism at Sonoma State University involves research into anti-racism and whiteness, the recruitment of more teachers of color and low-income teachers, and the preparation of anti-racist, critical multicultural and "educultural" educators.<sup>1</sup>

### **Sustaining Anti-Racist, Critical Multicultural Practices: Collective Strategies**

Out of the above interviews we identified several collective strategies that the interviewees regularly undertook in order to sustain their practice. All of the interviewees found the community a site of strength and support for their political activism. Each of them saw education as political and community action through which we can develop a sense of solidarity and moral commitment to the needs of oppressed people in the community.

Many of the women described gaining an understanding of their identities through indigenous teachings, through listening to the ancestors, to the spirit of the wind, to animals, and to mother earth. Judy talked about using drumming circles to connect with the many dimensions of self and with others across time.

Although not all of the interviewees were oral historians like Jean Ishibashi, many of them used narrative research in the form of story-telling about race experiences and about the biases embedded in our cultural scripts to sustain their identities. They emphasized the importance of listening to others, their oral histories, and their creativity.

Our interviewees described a number of classrooms approaches to help student teachers as well as their instructors move into the "cracks and crevices" between the cultural scripts that define our lives. In that space, independence of thought and action becomes more possible. Examples of classroom activities included the "cultural portfolio" (Lea, 2004a), masks (Lea & Griggs, in press), poetry, role-plays and simulation, case studies, critical incidents, and videos. In addition, most of the interviewees depended on friends and partners to support them when they felt the need to move away from the margins, and relied on their encouragement to help them move back to the margins.

Several interviewees described using simulation as a teaching approach to help students understand what Elena calls the dominant "scarcity model" that keeps us from moving towards the margins. This model, this set of cultural scripts is an aspect of whiteness. Not only did several interviewees describe this model in their own

terms, but they also described actively developing alternative small-scale educational models as antidotes to whiteness. Examples included the Educultural Foundation, and Project Quest.<sup>2</sup>

### Interviews—Individual Strategies

Our interviewees also described very personal strategies that they had adopted to sustain their roles as anti-racist, critical multicultural educators. These strategies included the use of prayer and meditation, reflective journaling as a means of developing self-understanding and accountability, and what was described as “hearing with our hearts,” especially inside the academy where the intellect rules.

Other strategies included moving physically to another space for inspiration, clarity and self-renewal; gaining insights and strength about race and whiteness from the writings of anti-racist (etc.), feminist people of color and their white allies; gaining inspiration and strength from the struggles of people of color and their white allies in the Civil Rights movement, Anti-War movements, anti-capitalist movements, and currently the anti-US/British empire movement.

### Conclusions

#### Action-Oriented Social Consciousness

We have emerged from the first stage of this project with a greater understanding of the kinds of people who engage in anti-racist, critical multicultural activism. Each of them embraces a willingness to disrupt familiar categories and relationships even if this results in being very uncomfortable and undermining privilege. They are also willing to navigate feelings of conflict/dissonance, and identify their own biases and taken-for-granted realities—their own cultural scripts. The anti-racist, critical multicultural educators whom we interviewed were also prepared to cross cultural borders, and to look closely at the ways in which the United States’ socio-economic structure and the culture of power privilege upper-class, male, and white people at the expense of others. They were willing to critique their own classroom practice, and to interrupt racist, classist, sexist, homophobic, and ableist behavior, even their own. They were motivated to explore how the practices and outcomes of school and society are socially constructed and reconstructed.

#### Action-Oriented Social Consciousness—Whiteness

Whiteness is a huge part of the reason why many teachers, like many human beings outside of school, are unwilling to rethink their motivations and the goals of the society in which they live. We conclude by looking at how many of them continuously negotiate whiteness in the attempt to sustain anti-racist critical multicultural identities and practices (Sleeter, 2004). The white educators in our research expressed a willingness to recognize how white social bonding has made

it difficult for white people to build relationships across race borders (Sleeter, 1993). They were also willing to recognize how whiteness reproduces white privilege and power in relation to people of color. Finally, they were prepared to look closely at the ways in which whiteness privileges white people and people of color who have bought into the cultural scripts of whiteness. It seems to us that given the love and commitment of all of the activists working on the margins of our educational system, there is hope for a more equitable and socially just society—one that Sylvia Payne and Erma Jean Sims' mother would be proud of.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Educultural Foundation is a California 501 © 3 nonprofit organization that teaches critical thinking about social and cultural issues through music and the visual and performing arts.

<sup>2</sup> Project Quest is a teacher recruitment, preparation and development program partnership between Sonoma State University (SSU), Solano Community College (SCC), and two high-need LEAs, Vallejo and Fairfield-Suisun. The goal of the partnership is to restructure teacher recruitment, preparation, and professional support and development in such a way as to meet the needs of previously under-served populations—low-income, under-represented teachers and academically unsuccessful students.

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